

Idaho State Journal, Sunday, Feb. 4, 2007 – by Dan Boyd (4 pages)

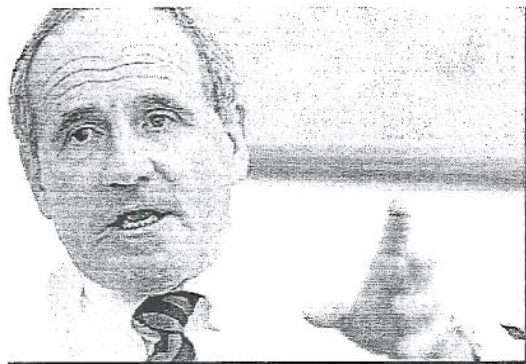
Risch made most of term

Former governor tackled key issues in seven months

BOISE -- Some might say Jim Risch waited 36 years and got only 220 days in return. Some might say Risch only charged around Idaho during his seven months as governor — tackling mercury emission, property taxes and a statewide nursing shortage along the way — because he wouldn't have to deal with the consequences.

Some might say a lot of things. The man who spent seven months as Idaho's governor before recently returning to his office of lieutenant governor has heard all the barbs. "The older you get the more you realize the river of life is going to take you where it wants to take you," Risch said. "Everybody mellows. I don't care whether you're on the right or left."

Don't let Risch fool you. At age 63, the gregarious and sometimes pugnacious Risch hasn't suddenly



turned into Gandhi. But after a political career that saw him become a county prosecutor at age 27, a legislator at age 31 and a veritable statehouse tsunami for the better part of three decades, Risch has indeed evolved. When the dust eventually settles on his tenure as governor in 2006, historians may look back on the Risch era as one of the most active in Idaho history.

There's a practical reason for that, as well as a more political one. The man rarely sits still. Walk into the lieutenant governor's office on the second floor of the state capitol in Boise and you'll see a visible difference from the opulent governor's office located just down the hall.

The secretary's desk looks like it could be in a medical office building. A stack of hunting and fishing magazines sit next to two waiting chairs. In Risch's office, signed football helmets from the University of Nevada and the University of Miami — the two teams that played in the Boise-based MPC Bowl on Risch's last full day in office — are among the few items he's brought with him from down the hall. To some, such a transition might be seen as a backward step on the career ladder.

But when Risch walks out of a meeting and into the room on a recent Thursday afternoon, it's easy to tell he's in a good mood. "The two jobs are very different," he said when asked the difference between his current and former roles. "When you're the governor you have 25,000 employees. When you're the lieutenant governor, you have one or two."

Risch admits the experience as chief of state had a personal impact on him. "You certainly have a different perspective," he said. "It's like telling yourself after you've seen something, 'Oh forget it.' 'You just can't.'"

Yet Risch insists he doesn't long for the bygone days when he, not current Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter, called the shots and made the headlines. "I went into it with the frame of mind that I was going to be governor for a certain amount of time," he said. "I told everybody when I started, 'I don't want to see any crocodile tears when it's time to go.'"

It's not often a sitting governor runs for a lesser office. In fact a sitting governor in Idaho had never before run for lieutenant governor. But that was the situation Risch found himself in last November when, after five months in the governor's office, he ran for re-election for his old job.

Many had expected him to challenge Otter for the Republican nomination, but, surprising the pundits, Risch opted not to.

Yet ask if Risch felt intimidated by Otter and his deep purse strings, and Risch bristles. "I gave up the opportunity to run for governor," he said. "I had the opportunity."

After taking office on May 26, 2006, after Kempthorne resigned to become Interior Secretary under President George Bush, Risch wasted little time making his presence felt.

Less than two weeks after taking the oath of office, Risch announced a major reorganization of the state's Department of Health and Welfare, dumping previous director Karl Kurtz and appointing Dick Armstrong in his place. "I gulped a couple of times before I did that," Risch said.



Little did capitol outsiders know at the time the move would signal the onset of a singularly decisive era. But Bob Geddes, a Soda Springs lawmaker serving his 13th year at the Legislature, wasn't totally surprised with what unfolded. "I think Jim Risch is a brilliant man," said Geddes, the Senate Pro Tem. "He's watched this process for a long, long time."

And all the watching had evidently prepared Risch for action. He called for a special session of the Legislature for the first time in 14 years to deal with rising property taxes. He ordered a controversial depredation hunt on more than 60 domestic elk that escaped from an Eastern Idaho ranch in August.

He directed the state to opt out of a federal mercury program, effectively preventing coal power plants from being built in Idaho. He released a plan opening up select parts of the state's 9.3 million acres inventoried roadless areas to logging and temporary roads. He traveled to Bannock County several times, touring the Heinz Frozen Food plant and visiting with law enforcement officers injured in a fatal shootout with a parolee on Sept. 1.

At a ceremony launching the renovation of Highway 30 near Lava Hot Springs, he even jumped into the excavator and began operating the high-powered machine to the consternation of workers and his wife. "He was everywhere doing everything for his seven months," Geddes said. "I think people were very much appreciative of the things he chose to focus on."

In December, political scientist Steve Shaw told the Spokane-based *Spokesman-Review* that sitting still would have been impossible for someone like Risch. Said Shaw, "The easy thing would've been to say, 'I'm going to be a caretaker and keep the seat warm,' but I don't think that's Jim Risch's nature and I don't think it's Risch 2

what the state needed either.”

Though Democrats opposed the special session and criticized Risch’s barn-storming ways, November election results spoke volumes. Running against former Congressman Larry LaRocco, who campaigned vigorously, Risch won by a nearly 20 percent margin. In the process, he received about 22,000 more votes than did Otter.

How did a kid from Wisconsin who came to Idaho to study forestry end up as one of the Gem State’s most influential figures? Even Risch isn’t quite sure at times. “I don’t care what you say. When you wake up in the morning and you’re the governor of Idaho, it affects you,” he said.

But Risch said he’s gradually grown accustomed to life in the public eye. His previous career as a trial attorney prepared him for living with the grave consequences of weighty decisions.

“I stood in front of juries and asked them to impose the death penalty,” Risch said. “But you can’t let yourself be overwhelmed.”

A short man with quick movements and a fondness for red ties, Risch might be the anti-Dirk Kempthorne. Unlike Kempthorne, who preceded him in the governor’s office, Risch is straight-talking and blunt, more of a bulldog than a charmer.

The first Catholic to become governor of Idaho (Otter is the second), Risch developed a Machiavellian reputation by once ordering protesters in the Senate gallery arrested and staging a political coup in 1982 to wrest the Senate Pro Tem position from Reed Budge of Soda Springs.

But the kindler, gentler Risch plays down the stories of bullying and retribution. “That stuff is probably overblown,” Risch said. “Not is it probably overblown, it’s definitely overblown.”

In fact, Risch even appointed Budge’s son, Randall Budge of Pocatello, as the Southeast Region Fish and Game commissioner on July 8, 2006. But Risch’s success in the 21st Century — and his more tempered approach — hide the fact his career appeared to be on life support 20 years ago.

After 14 years in the Legislature, Risch was upset in 1988 by Democrat Mike Burkett. Six years later, he lost an expensive 1994 Senate primary race against current Commerce and Labor Director Roger Madsen.

While the races are the only two Risch has lost in 37 years of politics, his career in politics seemed over at age 51 until former Gov. John Evans threw him a lifeline. Evans appointed Risch to fill Madsen’s seat in 1995. The bulldog was back.

In the last 30 days, Risch has seen Otter replace many of his appointed officials and begin the process of charting his own course as governor.

Though some of Risch’s actions appear likely to stick — the creation of a state drug czar position, for example — others will likely be overturned in time. Though the two aren’t necessarily close, Risch doesn’t begrudge Otter for not continuing where he left off and brushes off any suggestions his active tenure as governor complicated matters for his successor.

“That isn’t a tough spot to be in,” Risch said. “I did put some initiatives on the table, just like my predecessor had. The last thing (Otter) needs is a former governor looking over his shoulder and criticizing him.”

Some Republicans have privately grumbled that Risch, not Otter, might have been the better long-term governor. But though Risch surpassed most expectations, Geddes pointed out the timing of his tenure had certain benefits.

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"He never had to sell a budget to the Legislature," Geddes said. "He never had to do some of the hard things."

Still, Risch's seven months in power may yet open new doors for a career that only one year ago appeared to be stalled. To Republicans, it was as if they believed they had a feisty pack horse and, after many years, were stunned to find he was actually a thoroughbred.

Watch Risch oversee the Senate — a Constitutional duty of the state's lieutenant governor — and it's easy to imagine that's nothing changed since last year.

The Senate gavel seems to be an extension of Risch's arm — the sound of him twirling and tapping it in anticipation of the daily business is familiar to any reporter who's worked at the statehouse. Now back in his old position, the 220 days in the governor's office almost seem to be a dream. But things have indeed changed, even though Risch swears he's perfectly comfortable running the senate and manning the spartan lieutenant governor's office.

"When you're the governor, they start throwing pitches at you first thing in the morning," said Risch, no stranger to hardball. "(As lieutenant governor), you can kind of nod your head when you want a pitch."

With gavel in hand, he feels prepared for the future, whether that means a return trip to the governor's office or not.

"I've sat in that room for thousands of hours and seen a lot of people go," said Risch of the state senate. "There's a certain comfort in that place."

Call it coming full circle or just political coincidence. It doesn't matter to him. After all, being Jim Risch is all about being in the right place.